A SOCIALIST STRATEGY FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION (draft? 1970 PO doc. same name)

What strategy should socialists advance for the liberation of women? How can we arrive at an analysis of the oppression of women? What relationship does the liberation of women have to the struggle for socialism? What kind of movement do women need?

These are some of the questions facing socialists with the development of the new women's movement. The 1970's mark the first revival of feminism since the early years of the twentieth century. But this time, feminism begins by questioning all the basic assumptions of this society. The new feminist consciousness is part of a widespread radicalization, a rejection of the poverty, inequalities, and injustices of capitalist society. It grew up alongside the development of black consciousness, and the massive sentiment against the war in South-East Asia. Where the feminists of the early twentieth century set out to win an equal place for women within the confines of the existing society, the feminists of today begin by challenging the most basic institutions and hallowed myths of capitalist society, particularly the role of women within the family.

The coming to political consciousness of women also reflects the profound contradictions of their oppression in modern society. The enormous financial and technological resources of capitalism can put a man on the moon, but can't free women from the crushing burden of domestic work they must perform, or develop a really safe and effective form of birth control. More and more women are expressing their outrage at this irrational state of affairs.

The challenge before socialist women is to analyze this radicalization of women, and to work out a strategy that can lead to the liberation of all women. We have all the tools already at hand to make that analysis and formulate that strategy. Socialists have been the pioneers in working out a program for the liberation of women, beginning with the work of Engels in the 19th century when he analyzed the roots of the oppression of women. In the intervening years, Marxist theory has expanded and refined its analysis and program for women.

ROOTS OF THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

The myth of women's inferiority is the most widely held and profoundly ingrained prejudice in society. This has been true in all forms of class society based on private property - in the Graeco-Roman slave societies, in the feudal societies of the middle ages, and now under capitalism.

It is under capitalism that the oppression of women has reached its ultimate development. No other form of class society has gone so far in isolating women from one another in their individual kitchens, and depriving them of the right to participate in socially productive life. Only recently has this begun to change with the re-entry of women onto the labor market. Even so, for many women this constitutes simply an additional burden, since they must still continue their duties at home.

Contrary to bourgeois mythology, the second class status of women is not a result of women's biological "inferiority". Nor has it existed for all time. Women coming to feminist consciousness are fundamentally aware of this. They <u>know</u> there is nothing inherently wrong with them.

They suspect their sex was not born in chains. They are becoming conscious that their freedom must have been taken from them.

And they are right. The oppression of women is social in origin, not biological, and it is a fairly recent development in human history.

For the greater part of human history, before the development of the institutions of private property, social classes, and the family, women were the economic and social leaders in a society based on communal property relations and egalitarianism. It was only with the development of the fairly recent institutions of class society that women were dethroned and patriarchal attitudes and institutions came to power.

SOCIETY NOT BIOLOGY

This realization of the social roots of the oppression of women is profoundly significant. If women really has been oppressed since the dawn of humanity, if she really is doomed by her biology, then there is little hope for her liberation - except to be freed from her biological functions. But if her oppression is social in origin, if society is at fault, then there is something she can do about it. She can join with other women in a common movement to end her oppression by changing society.

THE FAMILY

The institution which has been most fundamental to the oppression of women since the dawn of class society is the family. Bourgeois ideology maintains that the family has existed forever, that it was the original unit of human organization, and that its existence is essential to satisfy human need for security and affection.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The original unit of human organization was the maternal clan, organized and led by women. The patriarchal family is a recent innovation in human history. It was designed to smash the sisterhood of women that existed in primitive society, to isolate them from one another in individual households, and to enforce upon them a strict monogamy that would ensure legitimate heirs for male property. The family has evolved through all the stages of class society to the nuclear family of capitalism, a tiny and isolated unit composed solely of a man and his dependents - wife and children.

No institution is so destructive to human emotional needs as the modern family. Far from giving people the opportunity to form affectionate relationships, the family forces people into association with one another by depriving them of any other means of social support. Women are made economically dependent on their husbands, and children of course are entirely dependent upon their parents. The soaring rate of divorce and "family breakdown" testify to the hopeless inability of this institution to meet human needs.

The family also imposes a crushing economic burden on individuals. Before the rise of class society, all of society shared the responsibility for meeting the needs of its individual members. Under capitalism, each

little family unit stands or falls on its own slender resources. It must provide all the necessities of life for its members - food, housing, medical care, care of the old, etc. This crushing burden has meant that more and more women have been forced to take jobs outside of the home.

The family has the additional function of transmitting all the competitive and anti-social values of capitalist society to children at a very early age. And this whole reactionary institution rests fundamentally upon the oppression of women. As wife and mother, she provides all the services and the emotional sustenance that keeps it going. For her the family household is an exile from social life. It denies her any direct means of expressing her own personhood. The phenomenon of the neurotic housewife, living through her husband and children, was well documented by Friedan in the Feminine Mystique almost twenty years ago. But above all, woman's role in the family enslaves her to her biological functions of child-bearing and child-rearing. These functions, which should be only part of a woman's life, and then only if she wishes it, become the complete occupation of her whole lifetime. Furthermore, she is denied any choice regarding motherhood. Birth control and abortion are denied her. And the social and economic pressure to marry and produce children is so great that few women manage to escape.

The oppression of women is one of the basic building blocks of capitalist society. Women are essential to maintaining the family system. They provide millions of dollars a year in unpaid domestic services. On the labor market they're shunted into the lowest paying, most menial jobs. And the myth of their subservience and their "natural" role as wives and mothers is the cornerstone of bourgeois ideology.

A REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY

The growing rejection by women of this deep-seated oppression is a profoundly revolutionary development. When women question their oppression, they must question the basic underpinnings of this class-divided society that owes its existence to the oppression of all women and the overwhelming majority of men for the benefit of a very few men - the ruling class. This society is incapable of liberating women. It can and will respond to pressure from women to improve their situation, to win concessions and demands. But the complete liberation of women will take nothing less than a social revolution.

How are women to be part of this revolutionary process? How are they to be drawn into the struggle to win their own liberation by liberating all of humanity?

Any strategy for women's liberation must flow directly from an understanding of the oppression of women under capitalism, and how they are responding to this oppression. Thousands of women from all social backgrounds, students, working women, housewives, are already being affected by a growing feminist consciousness. It is the first awareness and pride in womanhood, and a willingness to struggle for their liberation.

CAN WOMEN UNITE?

Since women as a sex are oppressed by capitalism, what is needed is a strategy that can unite all women in a common movement against the institutions in this society which oppress them. Is it possible to unite women in this way? Some forces in the women's liberation movement say no. They claim that women are divided in so many ways that it is impossible to unite them in one common movement. Women, they say, belong to different classes in society; they're physically isolated, and in competition with one another. To unite them is impossible. What's needed is to orient to one sector of women, to working class women, or poor women, or black women.

Others hold the opposite point of view, that women have everything in common, in fact that they constitute an oppressed class or caste, and any differences among them, differences of class or race, are of no importance. People who hold this view often see the source of women's oppression not in social organization, but in the male sex, and call for women to unite against the domination of men.

The truth lies between these two views. Class society does everything in its power to divide women from one another. But at the same time, there is a powerful basis for the unity of women, and that is, universal female oppression. Women of all social classes suffer to one degree or another from lack of access to birth control and abortion, inadequate or non-existent day care facilities, limited educational and job opportunities, and psychological and social conditioning. And women in the lowest economic-social strata suffer most from all these facets of women's oppression.

The fact of this shared oppression means that women <u>can</u> unite, on the basis of clearly worked out demands that go to the heart of what it is that oppresses women <u>as women</u>. This is the key to working out a strategy for women. If all women are oppressed as a sex, then socialists must work out a strategy which enables them to struggle <u>as women</u> for their own liberation around their own demands. This means we are out to unite all women whether they are in the schools, in the home, in offices or factories. Any other strategy denies the distinct and universal oppression of women as a sex. Shall we set out to organize just working women? If we did so, would we not be saying that women are oppressed simply as workers, and not as a sex?

We must find a basis on which to unite women, to cut across the divisions that are deliberately created among us.

Women, like all other oppressed people, learn in the course of struggle. A mass movement with the aim of organizing all women can draw tens of thousands into political action. It can awaken them to feminist consciousness by getting them to come to a meeting, sign a petition, or take part in a demonstration. Once mobilized into action, they can see and feel the strength of their organized numbers, and acquire the confidence that has been denied them so long. Above all, they will learn how profound their own oppression is, and who is responsible for it. Thousands of women are right now becoming aware of the need to fundamentally change the society that oppresses them.

The demands and political thrust of a mass, united movement of women is necessarily against the bourgeois government, the chief defenders of the status quo and upholders of women's oppression. This is very evident in the Trudeau government's refusal even to discuss the abortion issue, in spite of the majority sentiment in favour of repeal. The ruling class and its representatives are well aware of their interests here - to defend the existing institutions of male supremacy and capitalist rule, and to block or divert the developing mass, anti-capitalist women's movement. And the direction of the feminist movement is also clear. Its continuing organization and agitation around women's demands bring it more and more into political confrontation with vested capitalist interests, represented by the government and the clerical hierarchy.

THE ABORTION ISSUE

As socialist women we must do more than just work out an abstract strategy for women on paper. We have to take part in the real political life of this country. And the fact is, there already exists in Canada the core of a mass, united movement of women - the movement to repeal the anti-abortion laws. It is no accident or arbitrary choice that has made the abortion issue emerge on an international scale as the foremost issue around which women are organizing.

In Canada, this issue has already shown its ability to rally thousands of women in a movement which is having a profound impact on political life in this country. Other issues, particularly equal pay for equal work, and end to job discrimination, and child care facilities have also emerged since the rebirth of the feminist movement. These issues are very important, and essential for the liberation of women. But is has been the abortion issue that has been able to inspire and unite so many thousands of women in struggle against their oppressors.

Why is this the case? It didn't happen because a small group of women arbitrarily decided that this was to be the issue to which thousands of women would respond. The abortion issue found this response because it strikes so profoundly at the basic definition of women in this society, as reproductive machines. Wife and mother - for thousands of years women have lived within this narrow circumscribed sphere of existence. They have been denied the right to control the functioning of their own biological organism. They have been kept ignorant of the most basic facts about their own bodies, ignorant of their own sexual and social needs. Denied access to birth control and abortion, life has been for them one pregnancy after another, or infection and death at the hands of backroom butchers.

Women must be punished, in this bitterly oppressive society, for any attempt to freely express their own sexuality. What better way to keep women in chains than to sentence them to unending pregnancies, painful and debilitating childbirth, piles of dirty diapers. Moreover, their constant susceptibility to unplanned and unwanted pregnancies has been used to justify the discrimination that women face in every area of life - on the job, in the educational system, etc. And all this has taken place in the name of the "natural role of women" and the mysterious joys of motherhood.

The campaign for the right of women to abortion--to control their own bodies--challenges this whole rationale for the oppression of women. It poses the possibility of a new kind of society, new ways for women to live. For the first time it raises the idea that women can live full and happy lives without necessarily being mothers. For many thousands of women, this is a disturbing, but exhilarating and revolutionary concept.

Some forces in the women's movement claim that abortion is not a relevant issue to working class women. Nothing could be further from the truth. Working class women are constantly faced with unwanted pregnancies. They are most trapped within the family by lack of control over their child-bearing functions. Abortion has always been more available (but not freely available) to women who have money. It is working class women who suffer most under the present laws, who are most vulnerable to being maimed or killed by quack operators. They are also most trapped by the stifling and reactionary prejudices which tell women they have no right to sexuality without pregnancy.

It has also been argued that women shouldn't bother with this issue because we've already won it. Abortion on demand, these people say, already effectively exists. This could be called the "You've come a long way, baby" theory. The facts show that this is just not the case. It's true that the growing repeal movement has been able to force some concessions within the framework of the present laws. The number of abortions performed in Canadian hospitals tripled from 1970 to 1971, for a total of 30,000. That was a small improvement. But the overwhelming majority of abortions continue to be performed illegally, in dangerous conditions, just as they have been for years. For the majority of Canadian women, especially working class and welfare women, abortion on demand is nowhere in sight.

Moreover, the ruling class continues to wage a constant battle to push back the gains that women have made in this area. A good example of this is the recent move by anti-abortion forces in New York state to repeal the liberalized law there. That move was defeated but there will be others.

To win on the abortion issue will require a long struggle, precisely because it challenges the whole basis of women's oppression. But each victory that women win in this struggle makes it possible for them to go on to further action. The repeal of the abortion laws will be just the first step, not the end for this movement.

Those who think that women will be staisfied with this first step and go home don't know the power and expectations of women. A victorious struggle for repeal of the laws can inspire women with confidence and a knowledge of their own organized strength. It can make it possible for the women's movement to surge ahead, organizing around the other issues which are important to meet women's needs. On the other hand, if abortion repeal is defeated, it could be a terrible setback, not just for the organized repeal movement, but for all women's struggles for a whole period. A defeat of this magnitude could shatter the political confidence of women and turn the whole movement back. Women have everything at stake in the campaign to repeal the abortion laws.

And it's going to be a long and bitter struggle. Those who think that abortion law repeal is an issue that will be easily won, without involving masses of women in a real struggle, underestimate both the potential of this issue, and the power and consciousness of the ruling class.

THE RULING CLASS STRATEGY

It is because woman's lack of control over her own body is so fundamental to her oppression, that the government and church are fighting such a campaign to maintain the present anti-abortion laws. The continued enslavement of women to enforced motherhood is essential to maintain their oppressed status. Trudeau is very well aware of this. He is also aware of what a profound victory abortion law repeal would be for the women's movement. The government, the church, and all the other anti-woman forces have mobilized in the recent period. With all the resources at their disposal they are organizing a campaign to isolate and discredit the repeal movement.

The women's liberation sentiment in this country is very profound now. It has gone too far for them to dismiss it jokingly as a bunch of crazy bra-burners. Too many women now identify with the goals of the feminist movement. The strategy of the ruling class now is to try and embrace the feminist movement, make it their own, and therefore divert it from its revolutionary goals.

But the abortion issue makes it very difficult for them to do this. It is impossible for them to embrace a movement which so clearly and directly attacks the basis of women's oppression. So they are now attempting to split the women's movement on the abortion issue, and seek some kind of understanding with those forces that are not acting on the abortion issue.

This strategy of the ruling class is not often crudely expressed. However, only recently it turned up in a column in the Halifax Chronicle-Herald, by Monsignor Colin Campbell, a spokesman for the Catholic Church. The column deplores the antagonism between women's liberation and the church, and tries to find a way that the two can be brought together. He writes, "...it seems to me that there is one other reason that causes this standoff between the women's liberation movement and the church. That is the abortion on demand issue. It should be clear by now that by no means all members of the women's liberation movement are behind this plank of the platform...What is the solution to this impasse? Perhaps the rapprochement will be to work with that wing of the women's lib movement that does not support this policy."

This kind of pressure from the anti-abortion forces is so intense that some women have actually abandoned their support of this right of women to control their own bodies--in effect retreating from the front lines of the struggle for women's liberation. For instance, Marlene Dixon, formerly a leading spokeswoman of the feminist movement, recently announced at a meeting at McGill University that "abortion is killing" and the woman's movement should have nothing to do with this demand.

THE ROLE OF SOCIALIST WOMEN

The role of socialist women in the abortion law repeal movement is of central importance. We have a big responsibility. This living movement of women already exists. It's not going to go away. It's going to grow, attract more thousands of women, and win important gains. Are socialist women going to ignore this movement? Or are they going to step forward and take the leadership of it?

Socialist women have a unique role to play, because they have a clear analysis of the roots of the oppression of women, and how it can be ended--through socialist revolution. While it is true that women are going to learn by participating in the struggle for their rights, that will only be one side of the process of their political education. Women are thirsting for the kind of insight into their own oppression that a marxist analysis can give them. It is the intervention and leadership of socialist women that can ensure that the abortion law repeal movement fulfills its revolutionary potential, that it is not diverted by the ruling class.

As members and supporters of the New Democratic Party, we have an added responsibility. That is to bring the NDP into the struggle for women's liberation, which means now the struggle to repeal the abortion laws. The feminist movement must look for allies in its struggle to liberate women by liberating humanity. It can find this kind of support in the NDP, the party that represents working people, students, and other oppressed people in this society.

The active participation of the NDP could transform the abortion law repeal movement, bringing women much closer to victory on this crucial issue. But this will only take place if socialist women within the NDP take the leadership in this process. We must convince the NDP to take part in the repeal movement, and convince women in this movement to look to the NDP for support. The key to this is organizing women within the NDP. We must not turn our backs on women within the party who have not yet come to socialist consciousness. They are the ones who will make the party responsive to the growing feminist movement. It is our obligation as socialist women to share with them our analysis, and to win them to a revolutionary strategy for women's liberation.